Based on the lexical evidence and the literary context of Matthew's Gospel, it is highly likely—many scholars argue virtually certain—that a first-century Jewish audience would have understood *aionios* in Matthew 25:46 as a reference to the "Age to Come."

This conclusion is supported by the grammatical function of the adjective, the specific eschatological framework found in Matthew, and the common Jewish idioms of the time.

1. The "Two Ages" Framework (Intertextual Evidence)

Your observation regarding Matthew 12 is critical. In Matthew 12:32, Jesus explicitly contrasts "this age" (*en toutō tō aionī*) with "the one to come" (*en tō mellonti*). This establishes that Matthew operates within the standard Jewish eschatological framework of "The Two Ages":

- **The Present Age (*Olam Ha-Zeh*):** Characterized by mortality, decay, and mixed moral quality.
- **The Age to Come (*Olam Ha-Ba*):** Characterized by the Messianic reign, restoration, and judgment.

In this context, the adjective *aionios* functions as the technical term for "belonging to the Age to Come."[1] Just as "royal" means "pertaining to the king," *aionios* means "pertaining to the Age." Since the judgment scene in Matthew 25 depicts the *end* of the present age (the separation of sheep and goats), the "Life" and "Punishment" assigned at that moment must logically belong to the subsequent age—the Age to Come.[2]

2. The Grammar of "The Age" as a Proper Noun

Grammatically, this is not strictly an "ellipsis" (where a word is missing) but rather a technical usage where the noun *Aion* ("Age") functions almost like a proper noun ("The Age").

- In Second Temple Judaism, the phrase "The Age" (without the qualifier "to come") was frequently used as shorthand for the Messianic Age.
- Therefore, *zoe aionios* is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *chayei olam*, which did not mean "life that never ends" (a quantitative statement) but "Life of the World to Come" (a

If the disciples understood "Eternal Life" (*zoe aionios*) to mean "The Life of the Age [to come]," which was a standard Jewish hope, then grammatical consistency demands they understood "Eternal Punishment" (*kolasin aionion*) in the exact same way.[2]

By treating *aionios* as a reference to the specific *epoch* rather than a measure of *time*, the translation you proposed resolves the grammatical parallelism perfectly without forcing the word to mean "endless." The punishment is "of the Age" just as the life is "of the Age."

Conclusion: Yes, based on the writing style of ancient authors and the specific "Two Ages" theology evident in Matthew 12:32, it is philologically sound to conclude the disciples understood Matthew 25:46 as referring to the **"punishment of the Age [to come]"** and the **"life of the Age [to come]."**

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